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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000666

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KCRM](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN ADVISOR'S RECONCILIATION INITIATIVE  
TAKES SHAPE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) General Aoun's son-in-law and senior advisor Gebran Bassil provided details about Michel Aoun's anticipated initiative, which has yet to be publicly released. Bassil has been preparing the initiative for some time, but Aoun decided to wait until all of Lebanon's political players appeared ready for a comprehensive solution. The Aounist advisor said he is now in consultations with the various political blocs, revising the draft to ensure that all major political groups can live with the proposal. The initiative aims to address the fears of each of Lebanon's major political communities -- which Bassil divided into three groups: it will appease Future Movement's fear of Syrian-sponsored violence by establishing the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and working toward bilateral diplomatic relations; it will appease Hizballah's fear of Israel by pursuing demarcation of Shebaa farms and the return of prisoners in Israel; and finally, it will appease Aounist and Christian fears by seeking a direct popular Christian election of the presidency. End summary.

ANOTHER IN A LONG LINE OF INITIATIVES

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12. (C) Michel Aoun's son-in-law and senior advisor, Gebran Bassil, told poloff on May 7 that the former general is preparing to announce his fourth major initiative since returning to Lebanon in May 2005. Initially upon his return, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) sought out other political groups to try to form a plan in the event of a Syrian withdrawal, but according to Bassil, FPM's approaches were rejected by March 14. Then in early 2006, Aoun reached out to Hizballah via a memorandum of understanding. Bassil denied this agreement was a bilateral alliance, but rather a broad attempt to promote internal dialogue and pan-Lebanese understanding, as well as a strategy to force Hizballah to focus on disarmament and domestic issues. Finally, in October 2006, Aoun gave a press conference in which he presented his vision of how to solve Lebanon's problems, including the presidency, Hizballah's arms, and corruption. Unfortunately, Bassil said, the announcement did not spark the debate Aoun had hoped for.

13. (C) In an attempt to regain momentum, Bassil gradually developed a draft of a new initiative, but made a conscious decision to wait until all political players appeared ready for a comprehensive solution. Bassil admitted that the

initiative may appear to have started with him, but it now has broad acceptance among the FPM leadership. Bassil said he is now discussing the draft with groups across the Lebanese political spectrum to make sure none will reject the plan out of hand. Bassil informed us he is willing to adjust the draft initiative accordingly.

ADDRESSING EACH GROUP'S FEARS  
TO REACH AN ENDURING SOLUTION  
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14. (C) Aoun's initiative aims to gain acceptance by all of Lebanon's major political communities, which Bassil divides into three groups, by addressing respective fears. There can be no solution unless all parties agree, Bassil re-emphasized. The concept of a majority and a minority is inappropriate in Lebanon, Bassil insisted, citing the disproportionate influence of the Druse, which by his calculation make up just four percent of the population but have considerable influence in political decisions.

15. (C) Bassil assessed that the Future Movement and its allies are most concerned that the Syrians will try to make them irrelevant in Lebanon. Therefore, the Aoun initiative calls for the establishment of the Special Tribunal, but only through domestic consensus. Bassil suggested that otherwise, some political factions will declare the court illegitimate because it was established under Chapter 7. Bassil also envisions establishing better relations with Syria, including a fully demarcated border, diplomatic relations, and the return of Lebanese detainees held in Syria. Bassil believes that with greater trust, and in exchange for Lebanese promises to accept the Syrian regime, the Syrians will give

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up their attempts at hegemony.

16. (C) Second, the initiative seeks to address Hizballah's "fear" of Israel, and the excuse to maintain its arms, by resolving the question of Shebaa Farms, along with the return of Lebanese prisoners in Israel. It also anticipates making the Shia community feel they are part of a Lebanese system that protects them, rather than allowing the international community "to target them."

17. (C) Third, Bassil described FPM and its allies as afraid they are losing influence in the political process. Christians are underrepresented in parliament and the cabinet, by Bassil's calculation, because so many Christians are part of Saad Hariri's Future Movement, rather than representing their own communities. Moreover, Bassil stated that Michel Aoun had the support of 73 percent of the Christian community in the last parliamentary election, and thus should be the rightful representative of that community in both parliament and the cabinet. Bassil argued that the weakening of the institution of the presidency over the past 15 years has eroded Christian power in Lebanon. In addition, the president, which is the highest Christian position in the country, should not be chosen by consensus because the most powerful highest Sunni and Shia positions are not chosen that way. Bassil said his initiative would address the fear of reduced Christian influence in the selection of the presidency by recommending parliament accept a president chosen by the public through a referendum or direct ballot. Bassil insisted Aoun would accept a loss through by process, but he and his supporters are certain they would win.

18. (C) Bassil summarized that the initiative aims, through consultative measures, to appease each community's fears, build a strong Lebanese state with a monopoly on arms, internal stability, stable relations with its neighbors, and respect for international agreements. He reasoned that the first step would most likely involve the formation of a new cabinet in which the opposition bloc held at least one third of all seats. Simultaneous action would include passage of a new electoral law, legislation to create the international

tribunal, and publication of a cabinet decree designed to help the country progress toward disarming Hizballah and the Palestinians, electing a new president, and improving relations with Syria.

NEW FAMILIARITY WITH THE UNITED STATES  
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¶9. (C) Bassil continues to interact in the uncharacteristically calm and warm manner he has shown the last few meetings with Embassy staff, receiving poloff at his residence and spontaneously asking poloff to join his family for lunch after the meeting. Bassil mentioned the importance of U.S. opinion on this initiative and his desire to understand U.S. commitments, as well as issues such as the territorial demarcation of Shebaa Farms, so that he can plan the rollout of Aoun's initiative accordingly. Bassil also calmly stated that he had no reaction to the Patriarch's recent criticism which rejected Aoun's call for direct presidential elections, which in the past would have normally produced a lengthy and emotional defense.

COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) In recent weeks, the Aoun blocs has been making multiple, strenuous efforts to reach out to us. Aoun's advisors and MPs -- even the usually extremist Bassil -- seem to recognize at last that their problem with us is genuine, and not simply because "the Ambassador doesn't like the General." The fact that Bassil is willing -- eager even -- to share the FPM initiative with us in advance of its announcement is a significant change from the hidden negotiations that led to the 2/6/06 MOU with Hizballah. MP Ibrahim Kanaan, for example, has called the Ambassador repeatedly to ask his views on the presentation by Bassil to poloff. While we have many questions about the initiative -- how do direct popular presidential elections in a Muslim-dominated country protect the declining Christian power, for example? -- we have emphasized the need for those who wish us to reconcile fully with Michel Aoun to realize that Aoun's own words and deeds matter more to us than what is on a hypothetical plan. We have noticed that, in the last

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couple of days, Aoun has dropped his rhetoric against the tribunal (after describing Chapter VII approval as a "crime"). We will watch his words and monitor his behavior in the coming days, to see if it is worth sitting down and discussing this initiative in detail.

FELTMAN